

THE USE OF STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES OF AFRICA IN FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

This article critically examines Unicef's campaign in Slovenia, aimed at helping children in Ruanda, which caused huge public support in terms of the raised finances and visibility, but it also provoked a serious opposition from African people living in Slovenia and some academics. The article investigates the role of negative stereotypical consequences of such African images. The method of our research was a detailed visual analysis of the campaign including profound interviews with different parties that gave us their point of view. The campaign was financially very successful, especially because of the big media coverage. The marketing company had no ethical hesitations in designing this campaign, although they received some hindrances from the Slovenian African Centre. The main goal was to raise as much money as possible to help these children, but helping in this way has never enabled Africa to develop into an independent continent. One article, which may present a true image of a certain area, is not problematic, but a continuous representation of only one image can lead to stereotypes that trigger discrimination. The Slovenian public received a confused, muddled and incomplete picture of Africa, because the images were taken out of context and portray the whole continent as helpless and in need of the 'West' to prosper. The used images consolidate the status quo of the European superiority. Overall, that kind of analysis can provide useful insights into some of the strategies for a more positive image of Africa in the future.

Keywords: 'The Other', power relations, charity organisations, de-contextualisation, racial archetypes

Introduction

Africa is a continent that is often ignored or misreported about. Images of the poor or people, who are suffering, have been used by the media and humanitarian organizations to raise awareness and fundraise for many years. Depictions of the African continent usually include landscapes, sexuality, tribalism and exoticism. Africa is usually represented as “the archetypal other”, where Western tourists can rebind lost bonds with the nature (Cornelissen 2005: 679).

In the contemporary world we can perceive a close and significant relationship between much journalism and the aid community, as humanitarian aid agencies interpret the way that much of the African continent is understood and framed for non-African audiences. Humanitarian organizations are commonly regarded both by insiders and the wider public simply as organizations that are doing benevolent and altruistic activities in favor of those in need. Today the promotion and marketing of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as large multi-national organization is gaining importance, so that the relationship between the agencies and the media is taking on a new significance, as news coverage helps in raising awareness and bringing in funding (Franks 2010: 73).

The dominating image of Africa communicated through the Slovenian media, aid/charity organizations and academia is biased and one-dimensional. Most of the emphasis is given on war and conflict, poverty and disaster, passivity and despair. What is more important to say is the fact that the opinions of people from Africa are too rarely voiced, whether expressed independently or through Slovenian intermediaries. These images stand in the way for development in Africa, because they form on a misleading idea about the problems and challenges that African people face. The images show Africa in a condition of utter destitution and arguably serve to instill a sense of superiority of Western societies.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to examine the whole visual and linguistic content of African images in Slovenia. Rather, in what follows, we will consider in some detail Unicef’s campaign in Slovenia, aimed at helping children in Ruanda. We chose this campaign due to the fact it caused on one hand a relatively huge public support in terms of the raised finances and visibility, whereas on the other hand it also provoked a serious opposition from African people living in Slovenia and certain academics. The present article thus aims to show that the campaign points out the negative stereotypical consequences of such African images. The contribution is divided into three parts. In the first part a description and a visual analysis of the campaign, as well as a study of the marketing strategies, which use images of Africa, such as compassion, responsibility and guilt, is given.

The second part provides a detailed analysis of the point of view given by different parties on the above mentioned campaign and is based on profound interviews. The last part presents possible solutions on how to present Africa in a more positive or objective way, not only in the sense of humanitarian assistance, but also in other contexts, so as to avoid further stereotypes about Africa.

Images of Africa in Unicef's Action "Let's move Ruanda children from the street"

The contribution deals with Unicef, which has in Slovenia a status of a non-governmental organization. NGOs perform a wide specter of actions, which involves the promotion of human rights and social justice, opposition to exploitation of the natural environment and striving to achieve goals, which are overlooked or assigned to the governmental sector (Fischer 1997: 440). The main task for any organization is a constant communication with its environments or its publics. Such communication helps organizations to harmonize various interests and to restore public relations. Precisely restoration and maintenance of mutual understanding between the organization and its environment is the main purpose of public relations (Gruban, Verčič and Zavrl 1997: 9). Felton (2000: 38) argues that the function of public relations is magic – magic with words and symbols. That means that public relations draw pictures or images in the minds of the people.

Images are an important part of advertising, even though they are not part of adverts (panels, television). They strongly anchor in our heads and create stereotypes, false images of the world around us. Imagery can be a powerful marketing tool to help create an idealized social model and thus promote product purchases and certain kinds of behavior, for example giving money to the "people in need" (Evans 2008: 185). Our perception of an image depends upon the way of our seeing, although images embody a way of seeing (Berger 1985: 10). Rogoff (1998: 15) says that today meanings circulate in visual, verbal and written way. Images carry information, provide pleasure, they influence style, define consumption and mediate power relations. Day (2000: 391) says, that audience expects accuracy from media world, but often medium is the one to blame for etherisation of stereotypes. This is true if we look at the images of Africa used in National Geographic. National Geographic's pictures have strong and striking colors; they portray a smiling individual, which is the most important way to attain idealization of the other, because that is how the projection of the happy other is created (Lutz and Collins 1993: 96). The humanization of the other creates a sense, that depicted people are real and effect is much bigger when people are portrayed as individuals, because that creates a false feeling that spectators can read people's characteristics through their facial expressions, gestures (*ibid.*: 96–7). The message that

National Geographic gives to its readers is that there exist only two worlds, the traditional and the modern, which belongs to West and its technological improvement. In this sense these images create stereotypes of Africans as tribal, traditional and backward. This coincides with Wolf's starting-point in his book *Europe and the people without history* (1982) that the Western culture presents non-Westerns as having timeless societies, meaning they do not have any history and also that its people are the people of nature who have timeless personalities. Every process of change and improvement has been ideologically assigned to the West.

We can say that this 'otherisation' is present also in the Unicef's campaign on Ruanda, called "Let's conjure again a smile on children lips", which was launched in spring 2008. The action aimed at raising resources for children in Ruanda, who lost their parents due to AIDS and portrays these children as powerless and completely depended upon the "Western" help. Together with a local NGO, called APESEK, Unicef tried to help Ruanda's children, as, it was said in the campaign, there are almost one million orphans and thousands of children who live in the streets and have to beg for a living.

The most troublesome part of the campaign was connected with cardboard images of Ruanda children in full length, which were placed on the most visited streets in the center of Ljubljana, Slovenian capital city, called Čopova Street.³³ These cardboard images of children were standing there from 22 September to the 1 October 2009, until enough money – that is 200 Euros per child – was collected. The sum 200 Euros was fixed, as this is the sum that FIDESCO (another NGO with which Unicef cooperated with during this campaign) needed to give children, taken from the streets, temporal place of living, food, basic health care, provide them with basic education and to help them to re-establish contacts with their expanded families. As this amount of money per child was collected, the life-size cardboard image was symbolically removed from the street. An external influence such as weather, vandalism and abuse was meant to be a reflection of the actual conditions in which Ruanda children live in, so it was pre-planned that these cardboards will be damaged or even

³³ The other part of the campaign was also television adverts, which were shown on all Slovenian television channels and the Internet. The videos were obviously designed primarily as a promotional and fundraising vehicle for the Ruanda campaign. The images of the children are the same as the ones used in the street campaign. Three different version of the ad were made – each talking about the same story of three different children. The names of the children are the same as on the cardboard images, and we get to know a bit more about why these children are in this situation. The context is more evident. However, the videos do not provide us with the full picture of the situation in Ruanda; they only serve their purpose – sympathy and solidarity which influence people to give money.

destroyed. After 1 October 2009 the happening on the street was transmitted on the Internet, where the action is being continued in the same sense to this day through Google maps (Unicef 2010).

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) argue, photographs can serve different communicative functions according to a number of factors. The image analyzed here takes up the entire cardboard and apparently stands on its own merit. Its evidential force lies in its simplicity and in its high visual modality – that is the unquestionable power of 'photo-realism': the image of a black (male!) sad and powerless child, wearing a T-shirt with his name and plea to help him. The child is represented as being frozen in time and his presence reminds us of the 'realism' of the image; we can hardly deny 'the thing has been here', 'that it has posed in front of the camera' and 'remained there forever' (Barthes 1981: 76, 78). The photograph therefore is intended to be read as a piece of objective, factual information, and in this way to set in motion the actual process of being an eyewitness of a distant place. It is suitable to ask ourselves, what is the function of photography, if it is used for a humanitarian purpose? Taylor (2000: 138) says that photography is useless, if viewers do not recognize four conditions:

- they bear some responsibility for what they see in the pictures,
- that they have an easy solution (in this sense simply sending a text-message and donating some money),
- the intervention must be ordinary (just using your mobile phone),
- they must feel, that if they do not respond, there will be even more agony.

We can say that the described images in the Ruanda's campaign serve to fulfil all these conditions.

Another problem of the campaign is that nothing is said about the context of the image, as no information is given on why this child is asking you to donate money to save him. We do not know anything about why he is in such a position and even that he is an orphan in Ruanda. We only see him in live format, know his name and understand that he wants our help (in financial terms). The image of Ruanda's children is a powerful one, as they are used as a symbol of a powerless, defenseless 'creatures', they are threatened by the 'unknown other', and only 'we' – the donors, sending a text message – can help them in getting off the streets, not really knowing what the problem behind us. We can agree with Taylor (2000: 131–2), who says that today photography does not show reality anymore, but only what medium wants to show. Photography does not have meaning, because it is

constructed. In this sense the campaign shows poor children in need and aims at our sense of guilt and compassion to help them. Through the Ruanda campaign we become the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe (Baudrillard 1994: 67). This coincides with Jameson's (in Taylor 2000: 135) argument that the "visual is 'essentially' pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination". As Hall (2004: 44) warns us, meaning is always "constructed and produced". His thesis gives us an excellent headword to give some attention to photography and its meaning.

Contemporary persistence on the photographic representation of suffering, although predominately originating from market demand for sensational human stories, is grounded in the European ideal of moral Universalism, and legitimized by the assumption that the photographic image has the moral capacity to arouse compassion and build bonds of mutual responsibility and solidarity that unite people, regardless of their social characteristics and attributes. In fact, as long as the conventional assumptions of moral philosophy continue to be taken very much for granted, 'treating ethics as a matter of sentiment, sentiment as a matter of sympathy, and sympathy as a matter of spectatorship', the war and other spectacular images of the pain and death of distant people are used not only to emphasize the truth claim of any text as unmediated depictions of objective reality, but also as a rhetorical device with the sharp political edge (Konstantinidou 2008: 144). This motivates public compassion and political and moral action in the context of the contemporary humanitarian rhetoric of neutrality and global community.

The composition of the image is a powerful one. The child confronts the camera directly from the center of the frame. The image of a child as a "cultural conceptualization of a worthy victim" is "the most ideal victim in the perspective of compassion," "either because we may feel pity through our own memory of being open and vulnerable to the treachery of adulthood... (or) in terms of our adult identity and our desire to protect the child" (Hoijer 2004: 521–2). Hence, the color photograph works to fully exploit the dramatic potential of the presumed natural instincts of protection and providing security and safety for children, thus reaching the emotions of the audience.

The primary function of the image is ordination: the spatial discrimination of individual elements according to supposedly innate similarities or differences. However, it is now generally understood that such organizing systems produce the very differences they purport to only describe, the grid does not merely respond to racial difference so much as it reproduces/produces with certainty the knowledge that there are indeed such things as discrete human races (Foucault 1970). Divorced from any larger context, the image

transforms the individual children in the photographs into racial archetypes – examples of "their people".

Discussion: Confrontations of Different Opinions on the Campaign

There is little argument that the volume of aid which a crisis attracts is closely linked to the scale of media coverage, not necessarily the level of need. NGOs know only too well that disaster fundraising follows the news agenda. There are countless instances where a media campaign has had an overwhelming impact on raising money for a particular crisis and conversely where the absence of media coverage has meant only limited funds. We can say that the campaign has had very good media coverage and thus triggered a major response by the Africans living in Slovenia and certain Slovenian NGOs working in the field. The campaign was heavily reported about by all television and radio news and the radio and television ads were regularly broadcasted by all the Slovenian media even long after the street action. With daily advertorials public was informed on what is happening with Rwandan children on the streets. On the first day of the campaign, child shaped insertions were placed between the pages of a street newspaper, making media their bed on the streets. The campaign was heavily broadcasted on different social network portals and forums; furthermore the images were portrayed also in outdoor media – billboards and panels. As a result of this massive media coverage, the campaign was financially very successful, as they managed to raise even more money than it was originally planned and the money still keeps coming, as the campaign continues on the web portal.

In the following chapter we will try to confront different positions on the campaign, given firstly the position of Unicef, secondly the view of the designers of the campaign, thirdly the opposition of the Africans living in Slovenia and lastly the position of the Slovenian public.

The dilemma that NGOs face is twofold. On the one side they wish to raise awareness and educate about an issue, however on the other side but they also need to fundraise (Kaufman and Shewprasad 2005: 3). UNICEF in Slovenia defends his actions and work by saying that without these kind of images they would not be able to collect money from people and be able to help children in Ruanda. In this sense they focus more on fundraising than on providing a true picture of the situation in Ruanda. NGO use of these kinds of images contributes to claims of legitimacy and authority. UNICEF is legitimate in part because they claim to 'know' the situation in Ruanda, as by producing these images, they also present themselves as experts and authorities on the problems in Ruanda. In their fundraising activities, they also often claim to know what the solutions are – in terms of this campaign,

raising funds to move these children from the streets. It is clear that if an NGO wishes to be as effective as governmental or economic organization, it needs to use the same tools as their opponents. In this sense it is common that they work together with different PR agencies. It is clear that much of the public opinion is formed thanks to PR agencies. UNICEF in Slovenia was no exception to this, as they entrusted the shaping of this campaign to a well known Slovenian marketing agency.

If we look at the designer's point of view, we can say that the PR company saw no problems in the use of such images. They say: "The Campaign coincides with the new trends, in which the communication solutions try to intertwine the people with the attitude towards the brand and enable them the opportunity to interact or even to co-create communication, services or products. The people – consumers are in this sense not passive recipients of messages, but active participants in dialogue with the brand (in this case with Unicef). The aim of such communication is that people talk about the subject at hand also after the conclusion of the advertising."

Designers of the campaign also pointed out that they often expose problems of people, which are distant from the average individual. "Hunger, wars, epidemics in 'third world' is something that does not happen here, if it includes problems of the marginalized groups, such as alcohol, drugs etc., it is something that does not happen to us. It is a challenge to install these topics into our space and lives, as certain questions about ethics and integrity of people might occur. In the case of this campaign we tried to transmit concrete children from Ruanda streets to Slovenian streets. Most of these children were even withdrawn from the streets in Ruanda with the help of the raised funds and reintegrated in families or communities." The marketing company had no ethical hesitations in designing this campaign. They said that they received some hindrances from the Slovenian African Centre, which was troubled mainly by the fact that all cardboard children were black children. The marketing company stand at this point is that they wanted to channel an authentic message – it was a campaign on Ruanda's children, and they are black! The main goal was to raise as much funding as possible to help these children!

The campaign as said before triggered different feelings in Africans living in Slovenia. As Ibrahim Nouhouma from the Slovenian African Centre told us, the images of Unicef are offensive, shameful and influence African feelings in a bad way. Because poverty sells, images are used to get financial support, however simultaneously they also create the negative image of Africa, Asia and South America. Ibrahim says that collecting money in this way is wrong, because Slovenia is a multicultural country, where also African people live and

they can easily be affected by such a campaign. Helping in this way has never helped Africa to develop into independent countries. The images consolidate the status quo of the European superiority; simultaneously they also offend the emotions of Africans in Slovenia. We can call this marketing of poverty, as the negative images of Africa are being used for finance raising activities. One article, which may present a true image of a certain area, is not problematic, however a continuous use, a production of only one image is, as this leads to stereotypes, which moreover trigger discrimination. Such images suit marketing, as the public needs to be shocked in order for the campaigns to be successful. Dignity is not a part of human rights by a general definition, as human rights derive from it. Defining Africans by skin color and their denotation on this basis (begging, hunger) create groups, which are hard to be respected, as they are in opposition with 'our' respected values and characteristics. Not respecting Africans in this sense means taking away their dignity– this indirectly means violating their human rights. Poverty and exclusion signify the denial of the fundamental human right to live long, healthy and creative lives.

The campaign triggered heterogeneous feelings amongst the Slovenian public. Most of the people were not offended by the campaign, as they are bombed by these kinds of images by the media and certain campaigns on a regular basis. They see no problem in portraying Africa in this way as they stereotypically believe that the whole Africa is like that. They are poor, defenseless and need our help. Some people, mainly from the lines of academia and the NGO sector, were on the other side surprised by the campaign, as they saw it as one-sided and lacking concrete information on the real situation in Ruanda. Some opinions were expressed that people wish to help each other because they feel a need to be powerful. However the real question is how to be charitable without being patronizing. The problem is that by charitableness we support those, who work in these organizations, not those that we think we help (in these cases children in Ruanda). Everything is impregnated with the business. The key component for the development of a certain society is its attitude towards the 'unknown other'. That means whether we consider 'the unknown other' as our citizen, with whom we create and share our wealth or if we regard them as the only obstacles on the path towards our common prosperity. In the society in which we live, values such as tolerance, solidarity and cooperation, acknowledgement of the individuality of persons, simultaneously with the sense of responsibility towards the other, imagination together with creativity and an active role of the individual, prevail. So we need to decide how equal our global society should be.

We can conclude that in the campaign, sympathy and solidarity were demonstrated at the expense of an all-sided, professional and critical analysis of African problems and issues. With so many short stories that lacked background information, the public received a confused, muddled and incomplete picture of Africa. The used images show us that the continent is helpless and not able to help itself. It needs the 'West' to prosper and to help young children. Africa is represented as totally powerless and plays a completely passive role. Images are taken out of contexts or this context is created in the way some people expect it to be. That is how they support international politics and ideology for maintenance of the status quo of the European superiority. Day (2000: 391) says, that audience expects accuracy from media world, but often medium is the one to blame for etherisation of stereotypes. This statement is completely true in the case of Ruanda campaign.

Contemporary news about Africa is very largely about sudden disasters. There is an overwhelming need for more depth and understanding in much of the way that we report news about Africa, enabling audiences to move beyond the rigid stereotypes. Popular images produced by NGOs in the West contribute to the creation of stereotypes and the ways that groups in Africa are represented and portrayed in Western societies. These images often provide the grounds for our interaction with the other and shapes how we see and think about Africa as a place (Kaufman and Shewprasad 2005: 1).

Conclusion: Possibilities for a more positive image in the future

NGO promotional and fundraising material frame in large manner the public opinion on development issues. Past colonial images and the way we understand the other in everyday discourses are in an important relationship (Kaufman and Shewprasad 2005: 6). Edward Said (1978) discussed this process as 'the Other' and analyses the ways in which the Oriental subject was constructed within colonialist discourses of difference. We are continually in a process of representing and constructing the global South through visual images, language and discourses. Africa's image in popular media is stuck in negative imagery of hardship, poverty, hunger and war (Cornelissen 2005: 677).

Solomin-Goudeau (1994) warns us that photography is read within language and culture, what means that their meanings are always inside the systems of representation, which in advance denote its subject and our relationship towards it. Slovenian society is permeated with the idea of missionary and helping 'poor Africans' to live better lives. In this sense it is not unusual that such campaigns are so financially and media successful.

Images are not without their surrounding context. They can have multiple messages and connotations, not just for the subject, but also for the viewer. "One of the major criticism

has been on the use of the ‘de-contextualised lone child’ that has resulted in the creation of a stereotype in the Western mind; that the starving child has come to resemble an entire continent, in most cases, Africa” (Tallon 2008: 4). The described campaign of Unicef does not provide a solution to make this image more suitable. One of the main critiques of the Ruanda’s campaign is that they enable the donor to feel good in the short run, but not adequately address questions of long term action. The images used to also allow people to act without knowing or attempting to deal with broader issues in Ruanda. They only educate the public in terms of poverty as a stand-alone issue and not focus on various relations of power and privilege in the area.

Non-governmental organizations that use these kinds of images in representing the majority of the world, either through campaigns or educational activities, should essentially evaluate or critically assess the impact of their images on a variety of different levels. This is something that Unicef in Slovenia has not yet done. The challenge is of course to find a balance in ethical fundraising between maintaining ethical imagery and efficiency in fundraising.

What would be some solutions that might help to represent Africa differently? What is needed to portray a more positive image of Africa is essentially a more quality and extensive reporting by the media on Africa – this means raising awareness on individual countries, their varieties, and not just to lump everything together in one basket. People need to be educated so that they understand what are the causes and effects of poverty in the right way. Both the causes of poverty and the array of potential strategies for poverty reduction are inherently political. A central challenge for ethically representing the poor is therefore to avoid depoliticizing of how we talk about poverty. Everything has a larger context behind, for example, the appearance of hunger has little to do with overall food supplies and vast to do with patterns of distribution and access to food (Kaufman and Shewprasad 2005: 4).

Currents of assistance should flow in both directions, because as long they are drifting only in one direction, we are talking about dictatorship. The solution would be sponsorship between African countries and Slovenia and opening borders between them. NGOs should also be more active in awaking political parties and to trigger greater support for cooperation and actions in Africa. On the side of academia, students and academics can act as agents of change, and are capable of exerting real influence over their own situation, both politically, socially, culturally and economically. It is therefore crucial that they have a pluralistic view of the world and an understanding of how everything is linked together. Primary

responsibility thus lies in educational institutions, media and non-governmental organizations.

We can say that the images of Africa in NGO publications are slowly being replaced, as in recent activities the Slovenian African Centre is trying to improve the image of Africa in Slovenia on all levels. They introduced a code of written rules on how information and campaigns about Africa should be given or formed not to be so stereotypical. To conclude, we wish to present one positive example of the image of Africa – the educational poster “Africa Also Smiles” by the Irish African Centre, which was firstly introduced in 2006 and re-launched in September 2009 (AC 2010). The image on the poster represents Africa as a completely different place as the images used in Ruanda campaign. We can see people smiling, being happy, living in good houses etc. The poster is accompanied by a slogan “The dignity and resilience of Africa’s people must not be disregarded despite the scars of war, poverty and disease”. We believe that this provides a good starting point for the future to reposition Africa in our ‘Western’ minds and try to represent the geographical, historical, social, cultural and other varieties of African countries.

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